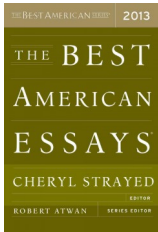


## The Best American Essays 2013

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*The Best American Series* may seem like a boring reading choice, but whenever I choose a volume from it, I am rewarded to discover new and unfamiliar authors. Plus, reading this series helps me to nudge my book selections in fresh directions. Wilderness writer Cheryl Strayed edited *The Best American Essays 2013* and her intriguing selections offered lots of surprises. Here are examples of a few of the titles: "Free Rent at the Totalitarian Hotel," "Highway of Lost Girls," "My Father's Women," "I'm Jumping off the Bridge," and "Confessions of an Ex-Mormon." In "I'm Jumping off the Bridge" Kevin Sampsell, a bookseller at Portland's Powell Books—my favorite bookstore in the world, described dealing with a suicidal patron and how artfully he handled it. But as the essay continues, you realize that the bookseller had considered suicide himself.

In the chilling "Highway of Lost Girls" Vanessa Veselka decided to investigate the murder of some female hitchhikers in the 1980s. During that time period, she had a terrifying experience while hitchhiking. A truck driver had exited the highway and transported her down a back road. He stopped and pulled out a knife demanding that she climb in the back. Calmly, she tried repeatedly to talk him out of doing anything, and refused to move from her seat. Finally, he said, "If you're not going to get in the back, you'd better run." So she did. He seemed surprised that she would leave, and years later she mulled over whether he had given her the choice only because he was convinced that she would not take it. Later, she read about a young woman killed nearby by a trucker who threw her remains into a highway dumpster. Next she investigated old police reports and also interviewed employees who had worked the truck stop restaurants during that time period. Most could not remember any murders. Yet the police record proved that many had occurred, especially of young teens who were riding across the country because they were runaways and had no place to go. Vanessa was one of those girls. She contacted the ex-wife of one brutal murderer and became convinced that the ex was the driver who had tried to harm her. Excessively neat cab, yes. Wearing dark blues, yes. A man with a knife not a gun. Worked the West Virginia/Pennsylvania route, yes.

Mako Yoshikawa tells the story of her father's loves in *My Father's Women*. It begins after his funeral when Mako and her two sisters discuss which women his father loved the most. None think it is the last woman he was with, the one he refused to marry because she was eight years older than him and who he insisted would die first. Also none thought it was their own mother, who had flown from Tokyo to New York with a daikon in her purse to accept his marriage proposal. Mako's mother theorized that he had always loved Masako-san best. She was a girl from his high school who suffered from lupus. After he died, the family found an updated address for her although their father had not seen her in years. Or maybe he had?

The word "essay" means "to try," "to attempt," "to test." These 26 essays do all of the above. They test our knowledge of people and our world. Dip into this book and enjoy some fine nonfiction writing.

Another excellent source to discover new writers of essays, fiction, and poetry is *Pushcart Prize 2014: best of the small presses*.

Posted by Dory L. on November 12, 2013

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